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ABSTRACT

Intended for writing teachers, this paper shows how "pithy prescriptions" for writing, such as "use definite, specific, concrete language," can be misleading or wrong. To support this thesis, the paper examines a technical writing book advocating short sentences and finds that it has sentences averaging 27.8 words in one section and 30.18 in another. It then discusses the problems posed by short, precise sentences including the choppy style they produce, which is not always suited to the education level of the audience, and the fact that they cause the reader to move more slowly in order to establish the necessary relationships between ideas. The paper states that teachers can learn two lessons from the analysis: (1) stop recommending that people write short sentences (because "short sentences" means different things to different people and because good writing does not necessarily use short sentences), and (2) beware of pithy prescriptions (because the real situation may require a more complex explanation). (EL)

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A POX ON PITHY PRESCRIPTIONS

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A POX ON PITHY PRESCRIPTIONS

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As writing teachers we often rely on pithy prescriptions that too frequently are half-truths--and sometimes are downright wrong. We laugh now at such instructions as

> Never Split an infinitive.
>
> Don't use I.
>
> You can have a one-paragraph theme or a three paragraph theme, but never a two-paragraph theme.

Or at least most of us do.

We recognize, of course, that many split infinitives are awkward, that a paper with too many I's will seem egotistical, and that every piece of writing should have a beginning, a middle, and, an end; and that writers should understand these matters. But we are aware that many of the pithy prescriptions of the past are simplistic: that they offer simple-minded solutions to complex stylistic and organizational problems; that although they are well-meaning attempts to solve such problems, they usually cause even worse ones.

We pride ourselves on not sounding like Miss or Mr. Prim. Yet we have our own set; for example:

> (1) Don't use nominal compounds.
>
> (2) Use definite, specific, concrete language.
>
> (3) Write short sentences (or, avoid long, complex sentences).

Such prescriptions are motivated, of course, by an attempt to offer help in solving real problems. The authors who propose the first want to help us avoid such monstrosities as "early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis." The authors who propose the second are properly unhappy about such pomposities as "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity. . . . ."

One can demonstrate, however, that both instructions are overly simple--not as

simplistic as those laid down by instructors Prim, but too simple to be adequate solutions to the problems in which they are rooted. The inadequacy of (1) and (2) have been dealt with elsewhere.[1] Let me demonstrate with (3).

When a new book of readings in technical writing arrived the otherday, I scanned the Table of Contents and, deciding that the book was worth looking through, began to read the Introduction for the Student. Soon I came to the Following Paragraph:

> A good technical writing style must be suited to the audience. Short, precise sentences help the reader to quickly assimilate the information one wished to convey. Long, complex sentences, on the other hand, demand an effort of memory that could tax the reader's desire to comprehend.

The second sentence stopped me: short, precise sentences; short, precise sentences.

We tell our students that sort of thing all the time, not only about technical writing, but about writing in general. But what are "short, precise sentences"? The phrase bothered me. How short is "short"? An average of ten words per sentence? twelve? fifteen? Not nineteen or twenty, certainly. And how does "precise" relate to "short"? In that it echoes and thus suggests "concise," it reinforces "short." Since the authors wrote "precise" rather than "concise," that cause for annoyance was my fault, not theirs. Or was it? Was I the only one who was going to read that word as an intensive for "short"?

Curious about what the authors' advice on sentence length might be, I moved on--to their first section, on style. If they didn't define "short," they would certainly anthologize in that section articles that would exemplify the use of short sentences. The first sentence of the first essay, however, ran 44 words. So I began to count:

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
44 words	25 words	65 words
13	26	6
36	34	25
23	20	27
17	30	12
8		
6 ⟌ 133	5 ⟌ 140	5 ⟌ 165
23.5 words	28 words	33 words

The average sentence length for those first three paragraphs was 27.8 words. Short? Furthermore, that average length was not the result of just a few very long sentences outweighing a gen[illegible] run of short ones. I would call only three of the sixteen sentences "short": the ones with eight, twelve, and thirteen words.

So I continued with my counting of the openings of the rest of the articles in the style section.

Second Paper

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph3
15 words	9 words	45 words
15	5	132
33		
3 ⟌ 63	3 ⟌ 15	2 ⟌ 77
21 words	5 words	38.5 words

The average sentence length for the first three paragraphs, despite the unusual second paragraph, is 19.4 words.

Third Paper

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4
18 words	15 words	17 words	23 words
19	18	24	46
	21		
2 ⟌ 37	13	2 ⟌ 41	2 ⟌ 69
18.5 words	16	20.5 words	34.5 words
	9		
	30		
	7 ⟌ 122		

17.4 words

Since one could argue about the length of the sentences in the first paragraph (the second sentence contained several short "sentences"), I disregarded it and averaged the sentence length in the next three: 21 words. (Paragraph five, by the way, was a single 65-word sentence.) Could one characterize those paragraphs as being written in "short" sentences?

Fourth Paper

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
21 words	25 words	13 words
9		12
9		4
9		10
25		20
		14
5 ⟌ 73		5
14.6 words		7 ⟌ 78
		11.1 words

The average sentence length for these paragraphs was 13.5 words.

Fifth Paper

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
11 words	57	4 word
10	37	27
66	36	
29		2 ⟌ 31
4 ⟌ 116	3 ⟌ 130	15.5 words
29 words	43.3 words	

The opening paragraphs in this fifth article in the style section averaged 30.8 words per sentence.

The results seemed clear to me:

1. 27.8 words/sentence.
2. 19.4 words/sentence.
3. 17.4 words/sentence.
4. 13.5 words/sentence.
5. 30.8 words/sentence.

Only the fourth piece could reasonably be described as being written in "short" sentences. There might be disagreement about the third piece, but certainly not the second. And how could a book extolling the virtues of short sentences include in its section on style a piece which averaged 27.8 words per sentence and another which averaged 30.18 words per sentence?

As a final check, I examined the editors' Introduction to their section of articles on readability. The first three paragraphs of their text (not including two pieces they quoted as examples) were:

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
6 words	26 words	33 words
37	21	
13	19	
3 ⟌ 56	3 ⟌ 66	
18.7 words	22 words	

The average here was 22 words per sentence.

Before I go on, I should make two comments. First, I have laid out all the numbers here to demonstrate, as I indicated in my analysis of the opening section of the first paper, that average sentence length was not a fluke of a few unusually long sentences driving up the average. Second, spot checks indicated that the average sentence length of the opening paragraphs was typical of the average for the rest of the paper. For example, I indicated above that the average sentence length for the first three paragraphs of the Introduction to the readability section was 22 words. The average sentence length for the whole first section of that Introduction, as indicated by the sub-heads, five paragraphs, was 23.7 words.

Remembering a technical report whose short sentences had irritated me, I dug it out and began to play with its opening paragraph. Here is the original (let's call it A):

> The Tennessee Coal Mines are using this "Easy Breather" in their "low-cost" mines in Parkersburg. These mines employ about 500 persons. They are considering it in other mines, and they state that the subject is

> controversial among mining people. They feel that the equipment is likely to have value in the event of mine fires. This is particularly so in mines where belt conveyors are used. The equipment is located at various points in the mine. A sufficient number are kept in the mine to supply each man on the turn.

That paragraph, with a sentence average of 13 words, was written by a safety engineer, a college graduate, to a management committee, all college graduates. (Remember that the injunction about "short, precise sentences" followed immediately on a statement that "A good technical writing style must be suited to the audience.")

A full page of that report, all of which was written in the same choppy style, would drive any reader with even a high-school education right up the wall. Furthermore, because it simply adds item upon item instead of relating the ideas, it causes the reader to move slowly in order to establish the necessary relationships.

Here is a revision with longer sentences (B):

> The Tennessee Coal Mines, which employ about 500 persons, use this "Easy Breather" in their "low-coal" mines in Parkersburg. Although they recognize that its use is controversial, they are considering using it for other mines. They think that it saves lives during mine fires, particularly in mines with belt conveyors. They keep enough "Easy Breathers" in the mine, located at various points for adequate distribution, to supply each man on the turn.

That paragraph averages 18 words per sentence.

Here is still another possibility (C):

> The Tennessee Coal Mines, which employ about 500 persons, use this "Easy Breather" in their "low-coal" mines in Parkersburg. Although they recognize that its use is

> controversial, they are considering using it for other mines because they think that it saves lives during mine fires--particularly in mines with belt conveyors. They keep enough "Easy Breathers" in the mine, located at various points for adequate distribution, to supply each man on the turn.

That paragraph averages almost 25 words per sentence. Would it be too difficult for college graduates?

Does one need to take two pages of A and two pages of B into the laboratory with 20 subjects, a stopwatch to determine reading time, and questions to determine comprehensibility to argue that B is preferable to A for college graduates? Even for high school graduates? Yet the average sentence length of B is significantly longer than that of A: 18 compared with 13. But, many--even most--readers of a book on style would think that an instruction to keep sentences "short" would mean that 13 was better than 18 for an average sentence length, particularly when the full instruction read "short, precise sentences."

It seems to me that there are two lessons in all of this. The first is specific to the instruction about the efficacy of "short, precise" versus "long, complex" sentences:

> Stop recommending that people write "short" sentences. That recommendation suggests sentences about Dick, Jane, and their dog Spot in a first or second grade reader. Good writing does not necessarily use "short" sentences. Anyone who thinks it does should consult a dictionary on the meaning of "short" or ask his or her students what "short sentences" or "short, precise sentences" means to them.

The second is more general:

> Beware of pithy prescriptions. For example, the statement "short, precise sentences help the reader to quickly assimilate the information one wishes to convey" is

> reasonably short, but it is precisely wrong. The real situation is much more complex than that and requires a more complex explanation (and thus perhaps a longer sentence).

Instruction not to use nominal compounds is as wrong-headed as the Prims' instruction not to use I. The real problem is when and how to use them--matters that can not be dealt with in a pithy prescription. Definite, specific, concrete language is often helpful; but so, sometimes, is abstract language. Useful instruction on which to use when can not be simplified into a snappy maxim. As I have shown, a book on writing that opens by recommending the use of "short, precise sentences" goes on to anthologize the writings of authors who do not do so.[2]

Instructions should adequately reflect the complexity of the matter on which they instruct. Pithy prescriptions oversimplify.

Footnotes

[1]On nominal compounds, see David Kaufer and Erwin R. Steinberg, "On Revising Noun Compounds: Four Tests," Journal of Advanced Composition, in press.

On definite, specific, concrete language, see Richard Ohmann, "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," College English 41 (December 1979), 390-397.

[2]See, also, Thomas M. Duffy and Paula Kabance, "Testing a Readable Writing Approach to Text Revision," Journal of Educational Psychology 74 (1982), 733-748. Duffy and Kabance demonstrate the "inadequacies of readability formulas and guidelines as a means of controlling the production of text." Readability formulas institutionalize the concept of using short sentences into a "scientific" verity.